

## Agrarianism and Politics

*By Donald Davidson*

THE TITLE of my paper, I hasten to say, is intended to be non-committal. It does not mean that there has been a marriage between agrarianism and politics, or even anything approaching a love affair. Yet perhaps this explanation is superfluous. It is obvious that there is not a close working-relationship between current politics and the theory of agrarianism. That condition is the subject of my discussion. The politics of agrarianism has not been defined or has been poorly defined. This paper is simply an attempt to locate the source of the difficulty.

Since 1932 I am sure that agrarians, whether theoretical or practical, have supported the politics of the New Deal in considerable numbers. The enthusiastic swing of agrarian votes to the New Deal was as simple a phenomenon as the rush of shoppers from the profiteering independent merchant of the 1920's to the brand-new chain store. It is no wonder that the practical agrarian is found making his purchases at the glittering Supermarket over which Mr. Roosevelt presides. It may be that, even while he buys, he is also bought. He knows that. But the governmental Supermarket has eliminated or disguised certain oldfashioned cash-and-carry features. An unlimited flow of goods and services can be had on credit. Then let them flow, says the practical agrarian of the Cotton Kingdom and the Wheat Belt. You take my paper; I take your goods and services. Politics has become as simple as that. If you ask me what will happen when the paper comes due at the bank, I will answer that I have exhausted the possibilities of this particular figure of speech.

For an estimate of the true distance between the political philosophies of our time and an agrarianism that remains at heart reluctant and unconvinced, I must return to the so-called theoretical agrarian. Now there are various kinds of theoretical agrarian. Let it be under-

stood that I am not in intimate communication with all kinds of theoretical agrarian. I do not know what principles animate the best-selling novelist who retires from a New York pent-house to a New England farm, or the Northern plutocrat who devotes his leisure time to purchasing and repairing old Virginia mansions and drinking imitation mint-juleps therein. I am not sure that I quite understand the principles of Mr. Roosevelt in the role of theoretical agrarian—that is, as the mostly absentee landlord of a Georgia farm. I propose to speak of certain people I know more intimately, whose ideas the urban reviewers and critics of this nation have with almost unanimous voice agreed to call pure theory without a taint of practice—pure theory, yes, or even dream vision, nostalgia, romantic wish-thinking, so I have been told, many times.

The theory of agrarianism, stated by some of these people in a book called *I'll Take My Stand* does not propose, as some frightened owners of electric refrigerators and vacuum cleaners have thought, the use of a sledge-hammer upon labor-saving machinery and the immediate return of the entire American population to the cow-shed and the old oaken bucket. Experience teaches me that it is next to impossible, while industrialism still makes diverting noises all around us, to clear the subject of all misapprehension. Yet I am sure that in this audience I will not be misunderstood when I say that these theoretical agrarians conceived the fundamental pattern of human life as biological, not mechanistic. They also fully and affirmatively recognized that the spiritual interfuses the material. They rejected the doctrine, so convenient to 19th and 20th century industrialism, that the end, if technically good or at least well-meaning, invariably justifies the means. In particular they attacked, as the major fallacy of our times, the conception of life itself as mechanistic and the subordination of life to abstract and special ends. Throughout all their early discussions they emphasized the absolute value of agrarianism as *a way of life*—as representing, in short, both good ends and good means. And while conceding the great importance of economics, they necessarily denied first place in human considerations to the economic motive. They opposed industrialism because, in spite of the evident good will of many of its advocates and agents, industrialism positively and without

fail did elevate the economic motive to the first place in its hierarchy of values.

But this sharp definition of principles left the agrarians without a politics. They were aware of this defect, and at the time made no attempt to remedy it. The "Statement of Principles" at the beginning of *I'll Take My Stand* is singularly devoid of political commitments. Near the end of the "Statement" a few political questions, of a rather topical nature, are asked, and then the principles close with words to this effect: that industrialism is an "evil dispensation" and must be "shaken off"; and that the race, nation, or community, groaning under industrialism, which does not shake it off, "has lost its political genius and doomed itself to impotence."

Nothing has happened since 1930 which would encourage them to modify that statement. Rather the contrary. But by 1936 this group of men were aware—as indeed, in some measure, they had been aware all along—that their proposals must necessarily seem defective in the public eye, because of their seeming failure to take a stand on specific national issues. When the opportunity came to associate themselves with the program of individuals and groups interested in distribution, they welcomed it, and the result was a second symposium, *Who Owns America?* Here, to the preceding negative critique of industrialism was added something like an outline of an agrarian-distributist conception of a proper economics and politics for industrialism itself—a means, indeed, for transforming industrialism. The main theme of this book is the necessity of restoring to American life, as the foundation of independence, the conception of property, as private, responsible, and widely distributed, rather than corporate, irresponsible and monopolistic. The various authors speak very specifically on such matters as regionalism, foreign trade, the Supreme Court, and the like. But the emphasis is still upon principles rather than practice. *I'll Take My Stand* examines and defines the Southern tradition, as a special example of a valuable American heritage about to be lost or obscured under the domination of a false Americanism. *Who Owns America?* attempts to define the real Americanism as distinguished from the false, and to

show that the real American heritage is being endangered by a fresh wave of Europeanisms.

And yet agrarianism, even with its distributist amendments, is still far from laying down a political program or enunciating a systematic political philosophy.

What, then, is the politics that agrarians ought to advocate? The simple question, if honestly and seriously faced, discloses the appalling one-sidedness of the political devices and philosophies of our day. I cannot think of an important political philosophy active in our time which does not make economics, and industrial economics at that, its central concern. Political philosophies differ only in the motives they use to rationalize and disguise their political monism. The rationalization of New Deal politics is humanitarian, but for effective persuasion it drops its noble sentiments and vows that it is going to make the economic system really work. In this particular respect it does not differ from the British and French governments, which in turn do not differ much from the totalitarian governments. In all these governments the dose of economics may be sweetened with talk of liberalism, race, nation, or class, but everybody knows that the main preoccupation of the government is to control the sickly economic system in such a way that it can go about determining things.

An agrarian would have to call the spectacle ridiculous, if it were not also humiliating and dangerous. At the one age in history when we are told that science has completely solved man's ancient problem of getting shelter and sustenance, we are preoccupied with that primitive need to the exclusion of everything else. A government is not expected to be a polity under which citizens can lead free and noble lives; that is not the test of its merit. Instead, governments rise and fall as the flow of goods and services is maintained or not maintained. The modern government is supposed to see that material necessities and comforts are obtainable *only* by purchase; and that they keep flowing in a stream into which all can dip—at a price! There is hardly a government in the world which has not sacrificed our old concern about freedom and nobility of life to the pursuit of these special eco-

nomic purposes; and these purposes, without exception are generated out of the industrial phenomenon; the artful, mechanical complication of old human problems that have been completely solved.

We would like to think that the United States is less guilty in this respect than other nations. Perhaps we are less hardened and purposeful offenders than some others. Yet, when you come to think about it, what act of the Roosevelt administration can be named that does not have as its immediate or ultimate object the manipulation of the economic system of the United States? Every important bill passed by Congress since March, 1933, has had a caption written on it in invisible ink: **THIS MEANS MONEY!** And all Americans, whether friends or opponents of the administration, have been able instantly to read that invisible ink. Mr. Roosevelt in very truth has taken from the rich and given to the poor, but he has not done so for sweet charity's sake—not in order to make rich or poor free and noble. He has done so that economic unbalance may be rectified, that depression or recession may be checked, that consumers may have money to keep producers producing and the unearned increment increasing.

The Roosevelt administration is interested in the South, as well it might be, but the Presidential committee appointed to investigate Southern needs and problems turns out to be an economics committee, and the South becomes, in the light of its report, the nation's "number one economic problem." In the report of this committee we read passages like the following: "The South is the nation's greatest untapped market and the market in which American business can best expand. . . . The South has an abundance of things the nation needs. . . . raw materials. . . . power resources. . . . climate. . . . southern farmers need implements, fencing, and fertilizer. . . . Northern producers are losing profits and northern workers are losing work because the South cannot afford to buy their goods."

We know how to read such language. The politics of the Roosevelt administration with reference to the South is apparently identical with the politics of the lumber interests—the oil, textile, coal, iron, canned milk, and meat-packing interests. The report of the Presidential

committee was drawn up by an interesting group of Southern New Dealers chosen mainly from the so-called liberal and left-wing contingent; but as to language and purport, it does not differ in kind, it only differs in degree, from the publications of the Chambers of Commerce and the Merchants and Manufacturers Association. In comparison with this report, the promotional advertising of our local Chambers of Commerce and of the great migrating industries of the North is timid, apologetic, and half-baked. Former administrations cloaked their designs upon the South in discreet silence or veiled them in high-minded expressions of concern about the moral character of the South. This administration is quite frank. The Federal government officially announces that we of the South are no longer a people, but an economic problem; that we are no longer freemen, but merely a potential market for producers and distributors of Northern goods.

When asked, under such conditions, to make a political commitment, an agrarian can only reply that his principles can not possibly be remodelled to fit such stark simplifications. An agrarian is not an ascetic. He would be glad to see economic conditions improve. He enjoys comfortable material circumstances as much as anybody. But he is obliged to argue that economics is too narrow a foundation for a general political theory. Or, still worse, a politics founded on economics is not a politics at all, but the negation of politics; and a government which devotes itself exclusively to economic concerns is not a government but a function of the economic system.

When specialization has gone that far, it really does not matter much whether the economic system controls the government, or the government controls the economic system. Under either control, human life tends to become servile and corrupt. The more servile and corrupt humanity becomes, the more relentlessly the crude economic motive comes forward, and then the more thoroughgoing and complex must be the effort to correct errors of efficiency and ensure continuance of economic system and government. But in order to make such corrections, it is necessary to emphasize the economic motive still more strongly, with the result that humanity becomes still more servile and

corrupt. This is the "infinite series," mentioned in *I'll Take My Stand*, which industrialism initiates.

Confronted, for example, with a minimum wage law, the agrarian says that so far as he is concerned the proposition begs the question. He does not concede that the welfare of a workingman is measurable in dollars and cents received from a factory. And he is astonished that his liberal and progressive friends should agree with the "economic royalist," who has previously insisted on making a similar cash assessment of human value. The agrarian does not favor the sweat-shop, either. But what he sees as the consequence of this act is an inevitable progress toward wage-slavery. He cannot grant that a fat, contented wage-slave is actually a better person than a lean and angry wage-slave. The fat, contented wage-slave will consume more industrial and agricultural products than the lean and angry wage-slave. But I doubt whether it can be proved that the resulting increase in efficiency is an actual gain for humanity. The lean and angry wage-slave at least has his resentment; he *knows* that his human integrity has been invaded and denied. The fat, contented wage-slave forgets all about his human integrity. He is bribed into silence, for as long as the economic system can be made to work smoothly. But meanwhile his acquisitive sense has certainly been sharpened, and his social consciousness has been dulled. The next time the economic machine gets wrecked, that fat wage-slave, unaccustomed to leanness, will be a shoddy character to depend upon for the duration of the emergency. The more fat wage-slaves you have, the more difficult it will be to have a political government. The agrarian is looking for a different kind of politics entirely.

There are, however, perfectionists who argue that, once the economic system can be made to work properly, we will have eliminated the economic motive and will no longer, therefore, be debased by it; we can then return to our non-economic human concerns. This is the doctrine of socialists, communists, collectivists of every stripe. In passing I might remark that this is in effect an application of the minimum wage standard of happiness. We are familiar with the other elements of this doctrine: the actual presence and bulk of the industrial system; its inevitable onward march, hand in hand with science; the weakness

of the individual and the need of collective action; and above all, the notion that the end justifies the means.

The agrarian asks: Where are the wise and just men who will administer the collective system? Where are the incorruptible citizens who will do the co-operating? For success, the system demands a spirit of unselfishness and ethical purpose of the very highest order. But if in the process of attaining complete economic efficiency, the economic motive has been continuously and relentlessly emphasized, just how can it suddenly be wiped out, and how can unselfishness suddenly be achieved? I cannot see how a long specialization in economic motive can generate a public morality sufficient to make a collective system actually work for the common good; but it will have to resort to force, as the collectivist governments of Europe are now resorting to force.

The politics of collectivism has nowhere proposed to eliminate or even check industrialism. Collectivism wants more industrialism, not less—perhaps industrialism without capitalistic finance, but nevertheless industrialism and a lot of it. The thesis of the Russian revolutionaries of 1917, Trotsky says in his *History of the Russian Revolution*, was that backward countries could leap the gap to complete industrialization; and almost the first act of the revolutionary Communists was to get a great industrial program under way. Now the agrarian must hold that collectivism cannot possibly escape the moral evils inherent in industrialism, if it retains or even enlarges industrialism. The central feature of industrialism is its positive allegiance to irresponsibility. Under industrialism, no man sees the end of his deed, no man faces the consequence of his act. And not knowing the end of his deed, he is precluded from becoming a moral agent. He has no choice.

Under industrialism as we know it, the works of men are all articles for sale; the deeds of men are commercial transactions, not moral actions. Industrialism gives us no choice, but to buy and sell. If I buy coal for my fire, I do not ask how dark and deep the coal mines are. I must be warm. It is a commercial transaction. This man has a clock with a dial illuminated by a radium compound, a pretty device which he can read, for convenience, in the night. The girl who



touched the dial with a radium-dipped brush is slowly dying. Her fingers and jawbones are rotting away. Nobody is responsible. It was a commercial transaction. (The girl's family may, of course, recover damages from the manufacturing corporation—it is still a commercial transaction.) Nobody knows where anything comes from. Nobody knows where anything goes. As far as the East is from the West, so far are our transgressions removed from us. They are not transgressions; we had no choice.

The collectivist may argue that the sense of moral responsibility may nevertheless be inculcated from above, through educational efforts. We may concede that this can be done temporarily. Humanity is eager for a cause, eager to have a meaning ascribed to what people are called on to do; but we must doubt the permanence of any moral fervor that is merely added through propaganda, as a kind of external assurance. If industrialism remains unaltered, its inherent irresponsibility will reassert itself as soon as the artificially engendered enthusiasm has time to grow a little cold. But it is also true that the abstract nature of the industrial regime of itself affects the educational process and renders it abstract and difficult. The whole proceeding is insecure and complex, and grows ever more insecure and complex.

I have heard an amiable and learned gentleman from the department of agriculture talk on this subject. He told an interested audience how he sat at breakfast in his home at Alexandria, Virginia, and meditated upon the nice series of economic adjustments which brought together for him at exactly the right moment his grapefruit, his egg, his salt, pepper, toast, and coffee, and how beautifully without fail every morning, with what admirable magic of synchronization. The lesson that he drew was a lesson of mutual *interdependence*, to be maintained by a strong central government, with large appropriations from Congress. He seemed to rejoice in his position, but to me it seemed a little delicate. I trembled to think that the safe delivery of a breakfast egg, and the freshness thereof, was the business of a strong central government and depended upon large appropriations. I could not assure myself that the safe delivery of this momentous egg, by this magnificently interdependent organization, arose from any sense of

duty or any particular feeling of good will toward Mr. Mordecai Ezekiel. The economic organization did not know to whom it was delivering an egg at this exact moment, with all this tremendous apparatus. All it knew was that it had sold an egg, somehow, somewhere. If Mr. Ezekiel had failed to provide money, there would have been no egg.

I could wish for some social philosopher to formulate a law of distant consequences. For it is clear that distant consequences, as a seemingly inevitable feature of an industrial regime, sap and destroy the moral impulse and the social will. Eventually men become callous even to near consequences. By false inference men assume that all consequences are distant, and they acquire a remarkable tolerance for the grossest evils. We all know the tale told by Lincoln Steffens, of the complete impotence of our cities that arises from this very cause. Our private morality, to be sure, is not yet so poisoned that we cut each other's throats on the slightest excuse. But in our public roles we are without shame. We have in fact now made irresponsibility the official law of public action, and the influence of that irresponsibility is found everywhere. Now, indeed, we no longer allow even our business men to face their own mistakes. Neither the people nor the business men have a right to make their own mistakes. The Federal government is not going to permit business failures. The Federal government is now ready at all time with its pump-priming, its subsidies, its unemployment insurance, its Triple-A and its Triple-C. It is not only *laissez-faire* that is going out, that is already gone, but it is free will that is being taken away.

I do not wish to labor a point already obvious. I will, however, record a healthy suspicion that the shrewd politicians of the world to a large extent have gauged quite correctly and calculatingly the extent of human weakness in one important respect. At the moment, there is no getting around the fact that a large part of the human population not only is not disillusioned with industrialism itself, but actually likes or thinks it likes industrialism and wants to see it go on. The politicians, noting this fact, are by no means engaged in saving democracy, saving liberal government, or establishing a new social order. What

they are saving is industrialism first of all. The social order, the democracy, the nation—all these are afterthoughts. The sense of great power, easily manipulated; the fascinations of the money game itself; or even the very excitement of being always in a critical condition; the spice of danger, now so tremendously magnified, caused by being forever in and out of world wars and catastrophic happenings—all these are among the attractions that keep the perverse human creature delighting in the vast wastes and destructions of the industrial order and always listening to the promise, never fulfilled, that a better life, less dirty, less ugly, less criminal, is just ahead.

Such being the situation, those who believe in agrarianism can only prepare against the day when this novel excitement has brought its extreme consequence. They should not permit their strong sense of imminent crisis to draw them into halfway political measures. They should not throw away wholesome principles for the sake of small expedencies. So far as the United States is concerned, agrarians may very well point out, and should never cease to insist, that the political principles upon which the American government was founded are consonant with agrarian principles, for these old principles represent conceptions of humanity in its whole aspect, and not merely in its one economic aspect. In all probability, agrarians will find their right political principles in the re-exploration of these fundamental ideas, in disentangling them from the abuse to which they have been put, and in giving them extension and clear definition.

In the field of practical and contemporary politics they will do well to keep a reserved and critical judgment, and yet they do not need to be utterly detached. They will naturally have a practical interest in whatever pertains to farm life and the preservation of farm life. They will be friends of conservation, under whatever party flag. They will certainly also be found advocates of regionalism, wherever regionalism really means local autonomy and the diminished operation of the law of distant consequences. For similar reasons they will take a strong interest in local government, and there, rather than in the national field, are most likely to make an actual political appearance, since their conviction is that reform in little must precede reform in

big. They must also necessarily support whatever legislation appears to limit and stabilize the operations of industrialism, for industrialism, once stabilized, has begun to be checked.

But their main efforts, I feel convinced, must as yet be outside the political field proper. The great task of this and succeeding generations is to limit and perhaps finally to transform industrialism, for only when industrialism is subordinated, minimized, and changed can humanity regain its sense of what life is and what is the purpose of life. Humanity must learn explicitly, what it knows implicitly but will only in its cynical or despairing moments openly admit: that industrialism, as we now have experience of it, is anti-human, anti-vital, is indeed the way of death. Only from a transformed and minimized industrialism can we hope to derive goods that will not corrupt us and services that will not pervert us. Agrarianism is a way of life, not a perfect way, but certainly a human way, and one that will know how to use without self-corruption such goods and services as may be provided by a transformed industrialism. It is the task of agrarians to study this way of life and to work for a slow but certain change. That is why agrarianism in 1938 has no politics.